FACT SHEET

Marines cheer a football game after returning to a reserve area from the front lines in Korea.

Integration of the Armed Forces

Attempts at racial integration for African Americans in the armed forces were made as early as the American Revolutionary War when about 5,000 blacks – most from New England – served in integrated units as artillerymen, infantrymen, musicians and general laborers. During much of the 19th century, blacks served in an integrated Navy. But as social attitudes changed at the turn of the century, and with the advent of Jim Crow laws, America returned to a segregated military, with few blacks permitted to serve.

The carnage of World War I brought the reality of the need for additional manpower to the forefront. The Army alone drafted about 368,000 blacks, most of whom served in segregated units.

By 1940, attitudes about race again were changing. The interests of the African American community were being fought for by the press, political lobbyists and organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Congress began to bow to pressure and passed one of the most influential pieces of legislation on race relations: The Selective Service Act of 1940. It provided "…that any person between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five regardless of race or color shall be afforded an opportunity to enlist…" But the Wagner Amendment did not provide for integrated units. Black leaders viewed "separate but equal" as a contradiction in terms and lobbied hard to eliminate segregation in the armed forces. Neither the best efforts of civil rights leaders, nor the flood of enlistees, that pushed the

armed forces to their limits to maintain segregated units, forced significant progress on military desegregation.

The post-World War II, civil rights movement gained momentum. Blacks had proved themselves on the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific and on the high seas. A number of leaders continued to call for the desegregation of the armed forces. In opposition, one Army study on the issue concluded that some separation of the races was necessary for the Army to make the most efficient use of its manpower. In reality, the services found segregation to be an administrative burden. Segregation lay at the root of many administrative problems, stifling opportunities for blacks and complicating the tasks of personnel managers. Despite these problems, many in the services clung to the belief that a segregated system was best for the fighting force and not necessarily discriminatory.

On July 26, 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981, " calling on the armed forces to provide equal treatment and opportunities for black servicemen." This bold move was tied to the realization that black Americans made up a significant portion of American manpower. Also, by 1948, the civil rights movement had progressed to where black interests could no longer be ignored – especially during a presidential election year.

Desegregation of the Air Force

The Air Force's integration plan of Jan., 6, 1949, proposed opening all jobs to blacks based on individual qualifications and service needs – race would not be an issue.

Th Air Force plan was met with much trepidation by blacks and whites alike. Black service members, while favoring integration, worried about competition with their white counterparts. Blacks also feared that deactivation of these units meant they would be relegated to unskilled laborers – a worry not unfounded given past experiences.

Desegregation began in earnest in mid-1949. After one year, the Air Force determined desegregation had moved, " rapidly, smoothly and virtually without incident." By the end of 1950, the Air force had 95 percent of its black airmen serving in integrated units, with a mere nine black units remaining. Even the press praised the Air Force policy.

Socially on base, military leaders successfully worked to break down racial barriers. Much to their credit, they had some success outside military gates, but most of civilian society remained tightly segregated.

The Navy's best efforts

Since 1945, even before Truman's Executive Order 9981, the Navy had a policy guaranteeing equal treatment and opportunities for all its members, but by 1949, 62 percent of black sailors still served as stewards.

The Navy's new plan, submitted in mid-1949, reiterated its goals of equal opportunity regardless of race. Navy Secretary Francis P. Matthews issued a Navywide statement "abjuring racial discrimination in the Navy and the Marine Corps and ordering that all personnel be enlisted or appointed, trained, advanced or promoted, assigned and administered without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin." Navy leaders put talented recruiters in the field to find well-qualified minorities to fill the Navy's ranks. Despite its best efforts, unfortunately, the Navy suffered in the public eye: In 1949, the Steward's Branch remained predominantly black with 10,499 black, 4,707 Filipino, 741 nonwhite and one white steward. Potential recruits turned away from the Navy and went to the Army and Air Force. According to Lester Granger, a special representative on racial matters to Navy Secretary Forrestal, "The blunt fact is that the most aspiring Negro youth are apt to have the least interest in a Navy career, chiefly because the Army and Air Force have up to now captured the spotlight."

Throughout the Korean War and beyond, the Navy would continue to work to integrate all specialties.

The Army's need for manpower

The Army leadership had concerns about the fighting capabilities of desegregated units. Thus in the peace that followed World War II, the Army rationalized that a policy of segregation, despite its inefficiencies, would certainly preserve a more dependable fighting force for war.

For the Army, the catalyst away from segregation was the Korean War.

After hodtilities broke out on the Korean Peninsula, all-black units experienced significant personnel surpluses while white units faced staggering battle losses. The only practical solution left for Army leaders was to assign black soldiers to undermanned units. The Army soon saw that the performance of these integrated units was noteworthy. Studies showed that the performance of black soldiers in integrated units was on par with white soldiers. On July 1,

1951, the Army approved the disbanding of the last all-black combat unit, the 24th Infantry Regiment. By the end of 1951, the Army began to experience the benefits of an integrated force, including racial harmony. Much of the confusion that characterized the Army units early in the war disappeared. Many of the white soldiers spoke glowingly of integrated units.

Every Marine a rifleman

As in the Army, it was finally the manpower demands of the Korean War that brought about racial change in the Marine Corps.

In 1949, Commandant of the Marine Corps General Clifton B. Cates, while in favor of racial integration, felt that integration of the armed forces had to *follow*, not proceed, the integration of American society.

Despite Cates' philosophy, the Korean War brought the need for change. Once the Marines started taking casualties in the summer of 1950, Marine Corps leadership found it had to replenish its combat units. Since every Marine – white or black – was trained as a basic infantry rifleman, the transition worked: The shift to an integrated Corps was relatively painless. According to the commander, 7th Marines, "Never once did any color problem bother us….It just wasn't any problem. According to Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps Lieutenant General Oliver P. Smith, " ...they (black Marines) did everything, and they did a good job because they were integrated. And they were good people." On Dec. 13, 1951, because of documented successes, the Commandant of the Marine Corps announced his service's policy of racial integration.

Though some services were initially slow to integrate, the armed forces experienced the benefits of desegregation long before the rest of civilian society.

Sources

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